

In the wake of wildfire: Hay and cattle nutrition

As producers affected by wildfires take the hay from outside or unknown sources home to feed their livestock, some considerations need to be made to ensure their nutritional needs are met.

- Cows will consume about 2-2.6% BW as-fed of dry hay depending on quality and waste some in addition. Make certain to provide enough that the cows can achieve a full daily intake. Account for waste when calculating the amount of hay to feed daily. Depending on how the hay is fed to the cows, there can be as much as 50% wastage. Bale feeders, if available, will reduce waste. If hay can be metered out to the cows, then waste can be reduced.

- The class of cattle consuming the hay must be considered. Young growing cattle, pregnant heifers approaching calving, and 1st calf heifers and cows that are nursing calves are among the classes with the highest nutrient demands. These are followed by mature cows in late pregnancy and then by cows in early pregnancy, mature bulls and dry cows. So, it may be possible to match better quality hay to the cattle with higher demands and lower quality to those with lower demands. Supplemental protein and energy may be required depending on the hay and the cattle.



- Cows being held to market soon may be managed differently than cows that are going to remain in the herd (either at the current location or after being moved) for the longer term.

- Stating the obvious, not all hay is the same. Some hay may require some additional nutrients (protein and minerals) from supplements while other hays may satisfy the needs of the cows. A supplemental mineral recommended.

HAY TYPES: It will be difficult to address all sources of hay in detail so here are some generalities:

- Native Prairie grass hay from areas east and northeast of the Texas Panhandle - typically this hay has a relatively low protein content and will need to be supplemented with protein supplement. The energy value of the hay is probably lower than that required to maintain and increase weight for most cattle, especially those with higher nutrient demands.



Supplementing protein sources will improve digestion of the hay and provide some additional energy.

- Native Prairie grass hay from areas west of the Texas Panhandle - because of the difference in plant species and growing season, this hay can contain more protein and energy than prairie hay mentioned above. Supplementation is still a need for the cattle with higher nutrient requirements.



- Hay from CRP fields - this hay source can vary in quality. Typically this hay will have a relatively low protein and energy content and will require supplemental protein for all classes of cattle.

- Bermuda grass hay - Good Bermuda grass hay can supply the needs of all the cattle listed above. However quality can vary and in some cases, the hay may require some supplemental protein and possibly energy for the classes of cattle with the higher nutrient demands.

- Crabgrass hay - a good quality hay that should not require any supplementation with it.

- Sorghum-sudangrass hay (haygrazer)- average haygrazer hay will support a dry cow or mature cow in gestation. Lactating cows and replacement heifers may require protein supplement.

Small grains (Wheat/triticale/oat) hay - Average wheat hay should not require protein or energy supplements if the cattle are presented adequate amounts of hay.



- Alfalfa hay - Alfalfa hay will not require any protein or energy supplements. In fact, the protein content is high enough that a full daily intake of alfalfa is providing more protein than the cattle can utilize. If possible, the alfalfa is better used to supplement protein to the lower quality hays mentioned above. Feeding 1 bale of alfalfa to every 1 to 2 bales of grass hay or sorghum-sudan hay should be considered.

TESTING:

Some hay sources may contain nitrates. The sorghum-sudangrass hay and in some cases the small grains hays and crabgrass hays, can contain nitrate levels that can present some issues for cattle. This can be tested to determine if levels in the hay are of concern. In the absence of testing, one is accepting a risk of possible abortions in pregnant cows and potentially death in all cattle if the levels are high enough. When testing, samples several bales for the test rather than relying on a sample from one or two to be representative of the entire hay supply. A possible management approach in the absence of testing is to limit the amount of the suspect hay that is provided to the cattle each day and feed other hay with the suspect hay. But, this requires that the hay be metered out to the cattle and that the amount consumed by all cattle is limited. This can be difficult to accomplish.